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Claudia Corti

The Iconic Body: ‘Coriolanus’ and Renaissance Corporality

What has always struck me in *Coriolanus* is the extraordinary process of physicalization of the playtext that Shakespeare, carefully exploiting the implicit dramatic structure of his source text (notoriously Plutarch’s *Life of Coriolanus* as translated by Thomas North at the middle of the sixteenth century) sets out. It is precisely this peculiar dimension of physical reality that becomes especially crucial in a complex drama like *Coriolanus*, in which the major transitions are played out in silence, and where emotions and passions reach such a degree of intensity that the play refuses to be contained within the boundaries of spoken language, transmitting its “moments” instead through an iconic theatrical discourse made up of gestures, facial expressions, and body movements. It is the body, in this play, that bears a continuous meaning *onstage*, sometimes even exceeding the borders of the playtext it occupies, as well as identifying its evocative, descriptive, and prescriptive force in the variegated materials of the characters’ physicality. The stage on which Coriolanus and its co-agonists move is an intensely body-conscious theatre increasingly supplementing dialogue with physical and iconic messages: from Menenius’ fable of the belly, to Coriolanus’ terrified refusal to disclose his wounded limbs, to Aufidius trampling on the hero’s corpse. The human body is the material this drama works on and works through, thus reminding us of Hamlet’s famous theatrical lecture: the purpose of playing, in holding the mirror up to nature, consists in showing “the very age and *body* of the time his form and pressure” (III, 2, 23).

In order to understand the body-consciousness and body-language of *Coriolanus*, it will be helpful to reconstruct the body-culture of the period in which this drama was conceived, as well as performed.

1. The Renaissance Culture of the Human Body

The paradigm of the human body lies at the core of the Renaissance *episteme*, as demonstrated by much contemporary work in cultural and literary studies, partially stimulated by such seminal books as Michel Foucault’s and Mikhail Bakhtin’s,¹ and by a sequence of important social historians,

¹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, Pantheon Books, 1978, 1986), and *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London, Allan Lane, 1977). Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984), and *Art and Answerability*, ed. by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, trans. Vadim Liapunov and Kenneth Brostrom (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1990). Note that while Foucault reads the body through the category of power, Bakhtin reads it through that of carnival.

anthropologists, materialist critics and new historicists,² for whom the body has become a privileged field of enquiry into the culture and literature of Europe.

The widely shared view of the human body during the Renaissance entails – as has been noticed – a “refashioning of the means by which people made sense of the world around them in terms of their philosophy of understanding, their theology, their poetry, their plays, their rituals of justice, their art, and their buildings”.³ In fact, the human body is omnipresent in Renaissance speculation, crossing all the fields of intellectual and social interest. Promulgated by natural sciences, it invades the political sphere, fostering the theory of “the King’s two bodies” – the one questionable as a physical subject, the other unquestionable as an intellectual (divine) object – a theory which dates back to the crown lawyers of Edward VI:

The King has in him two Bodies, viz. a Body natural, and a body politic. His Body natural (if it be considered in itself) is a Body mortal, subject to all Infirmities that come by Nature or Accident, to the Imbecility of Infancy or old Age, and to the like defects that happen to the natural Bodies of other People. But his Body politic is a Body that cannot be seen or handled, consisting of Policy and Government, and constituted for the Direction of the People, and the Management of the public weal, and this Body is utterly void of Infancy, and old Age, and other natural Defects and Imbecilities, which the Body natural is subject to, and for this Cause, what the King does in his Body politic, cannot be invalidated or frustrated by any Disability in his natural Body.⁴

The problem of corporality also invests religion, specifically the debate around the actual presence of Jesus’ body and blood in the sacramental wafer, in the Eucharist. As Stephen Greenblatt has brilliantly highlighted,⁵ people’s anxiety focused on what Christ meant, when he instituted that sacrament, by saying “Hoc est corpus meum”. Catholic doctrine interpreted the

² See in particular: *Political Culture and Cultural Politics in Early Modern England*, ed. by Susan Amussen and Mark Kishlansky (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995); *The First Modern Society*, ed. by A.L. Beier, Davis Cannadine, and James Rosenheim (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989); *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. by Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996); Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), and *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1986); Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford, Clarendon, 1988), *Learning to Curse* (New York-London, Routledge, 1999), and *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton-Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2001); Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body: Essays on Subjection* (London, Methuen, 1984); Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Discipline of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993); Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (New York-London, Routledge, 1995).

³ Sawday, p. ix.

⁴ *The Commentaries and Reports of Edmund Plowden, containing divers cases upon matters of law.... In the several reigns of King Edward VI, Queen Mary, King and Queen Philip and Mary, and Queen Elizabeth, etc.* (London, The Savoy, 1761), n. 212a. It goes without saying that the major authority on this subject is still the classical study by Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1957).

⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, “Remnants of the Sacred in Early Modern England”, in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, pp. 338-49.

statement literally, insisting that the body and blood of Jesus were really present in the bread and wine of the Mass, while Protestants denied this, proposing instead various symbolic interpretations or representational readings. Literal or metaphorical explanations inevitably led to a questioning of the material progress of the wafer's content in the body of the communicant. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer tried to solve this problem stating that "we do not eat Christ with our teeth grossly and carnally", for Jesus is only in Heaven, and what we swallow are just "tokens, significations, and representations". The reason why Jesus established the Eucharist in a material way was that human beings are fundamentally carnal creatures who cannot acquire intellectual and spiritual understanding unless their senses are energetically activated; so, "the eating and drinking of this sacramental bread and wine is, as it were, a showing of Christ before our eyes, a smelling of him with our noses, a feeling and groping of him with our hands, and an eating, chewing, digesting, and feeding upon Him to our spiritual strength and perfection".⁶

The obsession over corporality endemically increased during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with reference to the dynamic process that took place from a static view of the body to one of the body as *mechanism*, which was about to influence the literary and artistic domain, and especially that of dramatic art. The new science of anatomy – *i.e.* the methodical observation of the body – structured various modes of enquiry which tended to dispose themselves around two complementing paradigms: the one is the exterior form of the body, as in the famous figure of Vitruvian man, and the other is the interior one, as in Leonardo's designs of the dissections operated by him in the Florentine Ospedale di Santa Maria Nuova. Provisionally I wish to anticipate that *Coriolanus* bears the double imprint of this dual phenomenon, in the manipulation of both the exterior and the interior body, respectively through Coriolanus' and Menenius' theatrical enunciations. For the moment, in order to remain in the strict field of an historical reconstruction, let it suffice to say that the central figures of the Renaissance body argument are, notoriously, Andreas Vesalius and William Harvey (not accidentally coupled in many Renaissance treatises): the former, in his *De humani corporis fabrica*, practically founded modern anatomy; the latter, with his pioneer studies on the circulation of the blood, which he defended and fostered at the risk of reprimands on the part of the Santo Uffizio (Michael Servetus had been burnt at the stake with his books, in 1551, for challenging Galen's view of the circulation of the blood through the lungs) simply established the modern, scientific conception of human physiology.

It is now indispensable – for my present aims - to mention the rebound effect that these new physiological and anatomical disciplines had on the practice of theatre. Theatricality was explicit in Vesalius' anatomic theatre, which enhanced so many threads of speculation. The *Fabrica* opens

⁶ Thomas Cranmer, *A Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Our Saviour Christ* (Lewes, Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1987), p. 12, p. 16.

with two engravings: the frontispiece and Vesalius' own portrait. In the first (fig.1), the master is not figured *as cathedra* as he used to be in many contemporary treatises, but has been put at the centre of an imaginary stage-place, with pit, circles and galleries around him, and watched by a crowd/audience of students/observers/spectators. The second image (fig. 2) pictures the physician himself, engaged as he is in anatomizing a human arm, but whose look is characteristically not directed to the limb he is working on, straightforward instead to the reader/spectator, as witness of his anatomical analysis, as well as addressee of his both "dramatic" (in psychological terms) and "theatrical" (in stage terms) experience. The moment of the appearance of the "Vesalian theatre" marks not only the status of the modern sciences of the body, but the whole dimension of figurative and literary arts.

The Body Politic and Menenius' Fable of the Belly

There was a time, when all the body's members
 Rebell'd against the belly; thus accuse'd it:
 That only like a gulf it did remain
 I'th' midst o'th' body, idle and unactive,
 Still cupboarding the viand, never bearing
 Like labour with the rest, where th' other instruments
 Did see, and hear, devise, instruct, walk, feel,
 And, mutually participate, did minister
 Unto the appetite and affection common
 Of the whole body. The belly answer'd....
 'True is it, my incorporate friends', quoth he,
 'That I receive the general food at first
 Which you do live upon; and fit it is,
 Because I am the store-house and the shop
 Of the whole body. But, if you do remember,
 I send it through the rivers of your blood
 Even to the court, the heart, to th' seat o'th' brain;
 And through the cranks and offices of man,
 The strongest nerves and small inferior veins
 From me receive that natural competency
 Whereby they live. [...] Though all at once cannot
 See what I do deliver to each,
 Yet I can make my audit up, that all

From me do back receive the flour of all,
 And leave me but the bran'. [...]
 The senators of Rome are this good belly,
 And you the mutinous members. (I, 1, 95-148)

It is well known that the source of this famous passage of *Coriolanus* is Aesop's fable of the Belly and the Members, in which the belly was denounced for its parasitical idleness, and finally ostracized by the hands, mouth and teeth, with the result that they weakened and deteriorated. It is not certain whether Aesop was the source of the story later told by Livy, who recounts how, when the common people defected from Rome in the early period of the Republic, Menenius Agrippa was sent to persuade them to come back. He won their resistance narrating how:

in the days when all parts of man were not as now in agreement, but each member had it own ideas and speech, the other parts felt it improper that by their care and hard work and service the stomach acquired everything, while lying passively in their midst enjoying itself; so they agreed that the hands would not carry food to the mouth, nor the mouth take in anything offered, nor the teeth chew".⁷

The same story was also told by Plutarch, and from there it was taken over by Shakespeare. Another version of the simile state/body is to be found in John of Salisbury's *Policraticus* (mid-twelfth century), where the prince is the head, the senate is the heart (giving deeds their impulse), the judges are the eyes, ears and tongue, the soldiers are the hands, the tax collectors are the belly (which if overfull causes illnesses), and the peasants are the feet. Also Christine de Pizan, in *Le Livre de corps de policie* (1406) has the prince as head, nobles as arms, knights as hands, and labourers as legs and feet. The association of commons with *feet*, active both in *Policraticus* and *Le Livre de corps de policie*, is particularly significant for the comparison Menenius puts between the first citizen (who has been listening to the fable) and a *great toe*, when he urges a reaction to his tale:

Men. What do you think,
 You, the great toe of this assembly?
First Cit. I the great toe? Why the great toe?
Men. For that being one o'th'lowest, basest, poorest
 Of this most wise rebellion, thou goest foremost. (I, 2, 153-57)

⁷ *Ab Urbe Condita*, Book XXXII, in John Briscoe, *A Commentary on Livy, Books XXXI-XXXIII* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 182.

By the sixteenth century both John of Salisbury and Christine de Pizan were probably almost forgotten, while Aesop, Livy and Plutarch were becoming popular classics. The belly and members fable was taken up by Philip Sidney in the *Apologie for Poetrie* (3, 21) and is referred to in Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (IV, 2, 2, 7). Barnabe Barnes, in his *Foure Bookes of Offices* (1606), calls the king "head", and compares riches to blood and laws to lungs. Francis Bacon, in his essay "Of Empire", sees merchants as "vena porta", and explains that "if they flourish not, a kingdom may have good limbs, but will have empty veins, and nourish little".⁸ In 1598, King James I (when he was still James VI of Scotland) used the body/state analogy to argue for the primacy of the "head" or "Prince":

As the discourse and direction flowes from the head, and the execution according thereunto belongs to the rest of the members, every one according to their office: so it is betwixt a wise Prince, and his people. As the judgement coming from the head may not onely imploy the members, every one in their owne office, as long as they are able for it; but likewise in case any of them be affected with any infirmitie must care and provide for their remedy, in-case it be curable, and if otherwise, gar cut them off for feare of infecting of the rest: even so is it betwixt the Prince, and his people. And as there is ever hope of curing any diseased member by the direction of the head, as long as it is whole; but by the contrary, if it be troubled, all the members are partakers of that paine, so is it betwixt the Prince and his people⁹.

The only political possibility offered by King James is rule by the "Belly", that is *aristocracy*, of which the regal equivalent, Coriolanus' consulship, is obviously a part. The idea of *flowing* (from head to limbs) employed by James must immediately remind one that it was exactly in this period that William Harvey promulgated his revolutionary theory of the circulation of the blood, which Shakespeare totally assimilates in Menenius' speech.

Harvey believed the blood to flow not like the tides of the sea, constantly to and fro, essentially moving in one place, as the ancients – from Aristotle to Galen to Vesalio - had said, but in one direction only, from the heart to the aorta, from there through the arteries to every part of the body, then finally through the veins back to the heart, always in a circle. Although *De motu cordis* was published in Holland in 1628,¹⁰ it is amply demonstrated that Harvey had been working on his theory of the perpetual motion of the blood in a circle since his days of scholarly apprenticeship in

⁸ *The Essays of Francis Bacon*, ed. by William Smeaton (London, Dent, Everyman's Library, 1966), p. 173.

⁹ *The Basilicon Doron of King James VI*, ed. by James Craige, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, Scottish Text Society Publications ser. 3, 1944-50), vol. I, pp. 89-90.

¹⁰ *The Anatomical Exercises of Dr William Harvey, De motu cordis 1628 (printed in Holland): De circulatione Sanguinis 1649 : The first English text of 1653*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (London, Nonesuch Press, n.d. [1928]).

Padua dating back to 1597.¹¹ There is one page of his manuscript notes – later published by his friend Dr. Ent – that appears particularly revealing:

WH [this monogram is commonly prefixed by the author to signal crucial passages] constant per fabricam cordis sanguinem/per pulmones in Aortam perpetuo/transferring, as by two clacks of a water bellows to raise water/constat per ligaturam transitum sanguinis/ab arteries ad venas/unde Δ [delta signifies “it is demonstrated”] perpetuum sanguinis motum/in circula fieri pulsu cordis/An hoc gratia Nutritionis/an magis Conservationis sanguinis/et Membrorum per Infusionem calidam/vicissimque sanguis Calefaciens/membra frigifactum a Corde/Calefit.¹²

The approximate translation could be as follows:

On account of the structure of the heart, W.H. is of the opinion that the blood is constantly passed through the lungs into the aorta, as by two clacks of a water bellows to raise water. Moreover, on account of the action of a bondage on the vessels of the arm he is of the opinion that there is a transit of blood from the arteries to the veins. It is thus demonstrated that a perpetual motion of the blood in a circle is brought about by the beat of the heart. What shall we say? Is this for the purpose of nutrition? Or is it for the better preservation of the blood and of the members by imparting heat to them, the blood by turns losing heat as it warms the members, and gaining heat from the heart?

It did not take much time for him to make sure that the fundamental target of the circulation of the blood was in fact the *nutrition* of the body (as Shakespeare’s Menenius apparently thought): “In this way it is that all parts of the body are nourished, cherished, and quickened by the warm, spirituous, more perfect, and truly alimentative blood”.¹³

Starting from 1607 (and one should not forget that *Coriolanus* is traceable to 1606-1610) William Harvey became a member of the College of Physicians, giving lectures on anatomy and surgery, and making statements such as this: “See how the heart contracts like a closing fist to squeeze the blood into the arteries, and then relaxes to fill again from the veins”.¹⁴

The metaphorical relationship between the blood circulation theory and the vital “circulation” in the body politic – on the usual Renaissance basis of cosmic correspondences - is stated by Harvey

¹¹ See Walter Pagel, *New Light on William Harvey* (Basel-New York, Karger, 1976), p. 6. In the Epistle dedicatory to Argent, President of the College of Physicians in London, Harvey gives a few indications concerning the time of progress of his research, stating that: he had laid open his “new opinion repeatedly before”; that for many years it had been confirmed “by ocular demonstrations”; and that his “little book” was completed for a long time “otherwise”, that is before publication.

¹² Quoted in Charles Singer, *The Discovery of the Circulation of the Blood* (London, Dawson, 1956), p. 45.

¹³ Quoted in R. Willis, *William Harvey: A History of the Discovery of the Circulation of the Blood* (London, Kegan Paul, 1878), p. 192.

¹⁴ Quoted in William C. Harrison, *Dr. William Harvey and the Discovery of Circulation* (London-New York, Macmillan, 1967), p. 16.

himself in the dedicatory letter of *De motu cordis* to “The Most Illustrious and Invincible Monarch CHARLS King of Great Britain, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith”, in these terms:

The Heart of creatures is the foundation of life, the Prince of all, the Sun of their Microcosm, on which all vegetation does depend, from hence all vigor and strength does flow. Likewise the King is the foundation of his Kingdoms, and the Sun of the Microcosm, the *Heart* of his Commonwealth, from whence all power and mercy proceeds. I was so bold to offer to your Majesty those things which are written concerning the *Heart*, so much the rather, because (according to the custom of this age) all things human are according to the pattern of man, and most things in a King according to that of the *Heart*; Therefore the knowledge of his own *Heart* cannot be unprofitable to a King, as being a divine resemblance of his actions (so us'd they small things with great compare). You may at least, best of Kings, being plac'd in the top of human things, at the same time contemplate the Principle of Man's Body, and the Image of your Kingly power.¹⁵

Although Harvey's lecture notes are full of commonplace references, he never mentions the works of Shakespeare, his contemporary (nor, for truth's sake, any of the literature of his time). So Shakespeare's appropriation of Harvey's views, which at their best were regarded as idle dreams, and at their worst appeared liable to the Holy Office, sounds like an act of homage to *his own* Stuart monarch. Few people, Shakespeare excluded, in those days, claimed so extravagant a notion as Harvey had been reckless enough to enunciate. Shakespeare's provocative choice was in keeping with James' politically strategic rebuff of Catholicism, for reasons that we shall soon see.

The Two Bodies of the Consul

Where Menenius, in his espousing Harvey's circulation theory, adopts the epochal paradigm of the interior man, Coriolanus modulates its complementary paradigm, that of the exterior man, under various facets which I – for analytical convenience - intend roughly to summarize in three formal components, borrowing their terminology from the aesthetic speculation of the period: body as icon, body as token, body as simulacrum. In this way I shall attempt to answer an elementary question: does Coriolanus love or hate his own (and others'), body(ies)?

The Body as Icon

That Caius Martius, later surnamed Coriolanus, is extremely body-conscious, emerges at the very beginning of the play, during the Corioli's war, and especially in the duel that, significantly

¹⁵ *The Anatomical Exercises of Dr. William Harvey*, pp. vii-viii.

ignoring the theatrical conventions of his time, Shakespeare situates within the action of the First Act. It is in fact during the war against the Antiates that the Shakespearean Roman hero demonstrates a highly dramatic awareness – in more than a technical sense - of his own physicality. This is apparently shared by his military partners, as one of Lartius' comments clearly shows: "Thou wast a soldier/Even to Cato's wish, not fierce and terrible/Only in strokes, but with thy grim looks and/Thunder-like percussion of thy sounds/Thou mad'st thine enemies shake" (I, 4, 56-60). And Cominius reinforces the strength of Martius' appearance on the warlike – and dramatic – scenery: "Who's yonder,/That does appear as he were flay'd? O Gods,/he has the stamp of Martius, and I have/Beforetime seen him thus" (I, 6, 22-25). Precisely *thus*, altogether signifying *now, here*, and *in my present, actual, physical body*, is the same term that Coriolanus employs when he is going to struggle with his direct, personal enemy – Tullus Aufidius - to properly indicate through both words and gesture – but also directing the audience's looks to it – his more than winning, overwhelming, extremely virile supremacy: "To Aufidius *thus*/I will appear and fight" (I, 5, 19-20). The idea of *appearing*, implied in both Martius' and Cominius' enunciations, involves the corporeal, and hence inevitably *theatrical*, summoning up of Coriolanus' body *onstage*, with its hylic outlines and added metaphorical connotations. However, it is in Act I, scene 8, i.e. during the duel with Aufidius, that Coriolanus enhances the sensation of his body as the sign of *his own* self-perception - and consequently self-evaluation – which draws significance from the physical presence – *onstage* again - of his psychological *other*, or *double*. "I'll fight with none but thee" (I, 8, 1), and "Alone I fought in your Corioles walls,/And made what work I pleas'd: 'tis not my blood/Wherein thou seest me mask'd" (I, 8, 8-10), says Martius, to which Aufidius replies: "We hate alike:/Not Afric owns a serpent I abhor/More than thy fame and envy. Fix thy foot (I, 8, 2-5).

The priority of Coriolanus' prevailing body over any other occasional component of the Corioles victory is highlighted by a number of passages which insist on the fact that such a victory was *only* due to the captain's *unique* physical capacities. *All alone* is the term that recurs to signal this; for example in the soldier's report of Martius' entering the enemy city while his coward companions are flying back: "He is himself alone,/To answer all the city" (I, 4, 51-2); or in the herald's eulogy in Rome: "Know, Rome, that all alone Martius did fight/Within Corioles gates" (II, 1, 161-2). And it is precisely his materially, carnally overpowering form, that causes the sort of delirium which spreads among the Roman populace on welcoming the hero's return (II, 1, 202-16), and which is textually insisted upon as a tripudium of bodies reacting to bodies: a composite bulk of human frames – people "with variable complexions" - climbing walls and roofs, occupying windows, howling and gesturing, pushing one another. The context of intense corporality energized by this efficaciously reported scene neatly underlines the visual and theatrical overtone of

Coriolanus' figure simultaneously perceived like either a performing actor, or the sitter for a painting; that is to say, in a *posture*: "As if" – tribune Brutus comments – "that whatsoever god who leads him/Were slily crept into his human powers,/And gave him graceful posture" (II, 1, 218-20).

The Body as Token

After exposing his triumphant body to the exultant crowd, Coriolanus has to pass through a much less gratifying experience: following a traditional ritual, if he wants to be consul he is compelled, in order to gain the people's votes, to show them his war wounds in a public place (II, 3). As everyone knows, he partially satisfies this rite, presenting himself in the market place wearing the gown of humility, but refusing to uncover his scars; which will provoke the plebeians' rebuttal of his former election. Coriolanus intellectually knows that he *must* show his body, but he is emotionally repulsed from this act. The importance given by Shakespeare to this dramatic "point" can be inferred by his clamorous deviation from Plutarch/North, according to whom instead, "Martius following this custome, shewed many woundes and cuts upon his bodie, which he had received in seventeene yeares service at the warres".¹⁶ This crucial change marks a semantic elaboration of the source story on the part of the playwright, who intends – I believe – to condescend to ideologically relevant manoeuvres of his monarch and patron James I, as far as politically invested religious ceremonies were concerned. In order to signal his exponential approaching of the Protestant faith at the expense of his native Catholicism, James had given new emphasis to the ancient British rite of "the King's touch", or the healing/sanctifying imposition of the royal hands on the subjects' bodies, as a token of the sovereign's sacredness. This happened in purposeful concomitance with the contention about such fundamental sacraments, also involving corporality, as the Eucharist (on which we have previously commented). I think that in the case of Coriolanus' behaviour, during the incomplete display of his wounded limbs, Shakespeare adumbrates a critique, *via* parody, of the Catholic Confirmation, which, while implying the bishop's light slap of the cheek as the equivalent of the king's touch, also entails a very significant dialectic between the showing and the hiding of a symbolic "wound". In England, Confirmation is also called Chrismation (similar to Italian Cresima) because of the *chrism*, or holy oil with which the recipient of the sacrament is anointed: a sign, or seal, that prompts a conspicuous system of "soldier of Christ" imagery, which appears easily transferable to the idea of a true soldier who is seeking his community's consent by offering them the view of the corporeal signs or seals of his God-blessed

¹⁶ *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes, Compared together by the Grave and Learned Philosopher and Historiographer, Plutarke of Cheronea, translated etc. by Thomas North* (London, Thomas Wight, 1595), p. 242.

fortune in war (the “whatsoever god crept into his human powers” evoked by the tribune’s words). However, in the traditional Chrismation rite, this precious seal left on the Christian soldier’s forehead by the officiant’s oiled finger, was characteristically felt like a metaphorical incision cut by God in the human flesh, as a reminder of the adept’s new partaking in the general Christian army. As such, that is in being a physical token of divine grace, this symbolic *wound* had to be carefully covered (for a certain period), hidden from vulgar sight by a white band arranged around the young soldier’s head. In this sense, Coriolanus’ ambiguous behaviour in the showing/unshowing of his scarred body – “I have here the customary gown”, II, 3, 85, vs. “I will not seal your knowledge with showing them [his wounds]”, II, 3, 106 – looks like the parodic performance of a ceremony of Catholic Confirmation: an element which King James, in pursuing the Elizabethan “rule by consent” instance would have implicitly appreciated, if not explicitly required.

The Body as Simulacrum

In the process of symbolization that progressively (i.e. dramatically) arrays Coriolanus’ figure, a large space is reserved to the treatment of the physical body as a *form* which obliquely alludes to hidden sensations and censured passions, making what cannot be said much more relevant than what is being spoken about. This process by which the iconic body, continuously perceived by both co-agonists and audience in all its overwhelming physical strength, is overturned into the *mere semblance*, or *simulacrum*, of recondite, inexpressible ideas, simultaneously involves the agonist, Coriolanus, and his direct antagonist, Aufidius. Reciprocally, what the rival’s body *stands for* is, for both Coriolanus and Aufidius, concealed, repressed *love*, that is to say a more or less latent component of *homoeroticism*. Precisely this component – which I shall textually analyse later – is being nowadays heavily exploited in contemporary productions of this play, starting from the memorably transgressive 1984-85 performance of a notorious gay such as the actor Ian McKellen (frequently figured topless as well as wearing only briefs in the most crucial moments) directed by Peter Hall at the National Theatre in London. Shakespeare’s play - as we shall see - has a great potential to explore the implicitly homosexual relationship between the two warriors, and many directors are making their attraction thoroughly explicit. For example, the *Coriolanus* performed by the Royal Shakespeare Theatre during the 2007-08 season, is directed so that, as the two agonists come together for their single combat and deal each other crushing blows, a loud backing track of heavy breathing starts playing, growing louder as the characters’ fight blends into it. Eventually Coriolanus and Aufidius, panting loudly, stand opposite each other almost naked, throw down their

weapons and run together to start grappling hand to hand, as the breathing track reaches its climax. Finally, Coriolanus and Aufidius passionately kiss by torchlight; the kiss making sense of the killing and leaving Aufidius, when everyone has walked off, cradling Coriolanus' body.

Of course, this sort of productions attributes to Coriolanus a considerable Oedipus complex towards his mother Volumnia, as the principal booster of his homosexuality. Perhaps excessively insisted on over recent productions, nonetheless Coriolanus' and Aufidius' mutual homoerotic attraction is amply justified by the Shakespearean text, which again summons up the typical Renaissance concern with corporality. Indeed, Martius' Oedipal obsession with his mother – a subdued passion that leads him to hidden/overt homosexuality – is everywhere present, from the text's insistence on the fact that any of the captain's more-than-human achievements in the wars was *only* due to his will to please his mother (Act I), to the hero's double fear both of deluding her, and (chiefly) of being punished by her, that he experiences during the long action of Act III. What finally emerges is that he appears transparently as a man subjugated by his mother's overpowering *body power*. Yes, because it is her overwhelming physical presence which orientates any of his existential as well as political choices. Whenever Coriolanus succeeds in overcoming his own undefeated nature by agreeing to bow to anybody – either the people's tribunes or his family's patrician friends – it is because he has been committed to it by Volumnia's instructions of bodily behaviour. See, for example, the grandiosely metatheatrical scene 2 of Act III. She appears on stage dominantly interrupting her son's discussion about his own indomitable nature. Her slow and stately entrance opposes her son's impetuous force, when Coriolanus catches a glimpse of her implacable figure: "I talk of you,/Why did you wish me milder? Would you have me/False to my nature?" (III, 2, 13-5). Here the actor must mingle petulance and defiance, as if moved by an uneasy sense of guilt, which makes him regress from the proud warrior into a spoiled teenager in a potent image of domestic tyranny.¹⁷ The exponential accumulation of theatrical images – from "It is a part/ That I shall blush in acting" in II, 2, 144-5, to "You have put me now to such a part which never/I shall discharge to th'life" (III, 2, 105-6), until "Like a dull actor now/I have forgot my part and I am out,/Even to a full disgrace", in V, 3, 40-2) – expresses the warrior's inability to perform a role alien to his spirit, continuously repressed by Volumnia's maternal suasion. Everyone in the scene realizes that he/she is present at an elaborate nursery lesson, in which the greatest fighter of the age is being scolded into submission by his mother. In his first acceptance speech, Coriolanus metatheatrically plays with a series of false exits before returning to corporally confront his mother, to impress upon her the gravity of her request:

¹⁷ See my article 'L'eros in *Coriolanus*', in *Tragiche risonanze shakespeariane*, ed. by Laura Di Michele (Napoli, Liguori, 2001), pp. 172-89.

Must I go show them my unbarb'd sconce? Must I
 With my base tongue give to my noble heart
 A lie that it must bear? Well, I will do't: [here, a false exit]
 Yet were there but this single plot to lose,
 This mould of Martius, they to dust should grind it
 And throw't against the wind. To th'market-place! [false exit]
 You have put me now to such a part which never
 I shall discharge to th'life. (III, 2, 99-106)

As soon as Volumnia perceives her loosening hold of her son, she immediately tightens the maternal reins by calling him “sweet son” and bidding him perform “to have my praise” (III, 2, 107-9). At this point Coriolanus decides that his only option is to do what she wants, and resignedly concedes “Well, I must do't” (110); but immediately finds in himself a significantly degrading “harlot's spirit” (112), feeling that his autonomous will has receded, dragging back with it his sexual independence from his mother, as is superbly signified by his pathetically childish fear of mother's punishment: “Pray be content./Mother, I am going to the market-place:/*Chide me no more*” (130-2).

The homoerotic component of Coriolanus' nature – apparently stimulated by his Oedipal complex – can be perceived from the very beginning of the play, where Aufidius is immediately figured as Coriolanus's “other”, the mirror of his own physical potency and military valour: “were I anything but what I am, I would wish me only he”, the hero says (I, 1, 230-1). What is significant is that this external projection soon becomes intimately perceived within a very peculiar sense of guilt: “I sin in envying his nobility” (I, 1, 229). This slip of the tongue, which is implied in the utterance of the term “sin”, is contextually destined to become the symptom of a recondite desire, whose object expressively requires to be gained through *physical fight*: “To Aufidius thus I will appear and fight” (I, 5, 19-20), where “thus” alludes to the glory and power implicit in his body soaked with the blood of his enemies, both physically strong and sexually victorious.

The paradigm of physical fight as a hidden search for erotic touch is easy to find in Shakespeare's dramatic discourse (see for example the use of *to wrestle* in *As You Like It*, I, 3, 18-21; *to sport* in *Othello*, II, 1, 222-6; *to rebel* in *Hamlet*, I, 3, 43-4); but in *Coriolanus* the paradigm does not function at a merely linguistic level, because it tends to actualize itself in concrete, corporeal action. A violent duel between Coriolanus and Aufidius takes place at the end of Act I, after a mutual chase (in itself suggestive of a mutual attraction) and with an extraordinary exchange of insults, whose excessive vehemence seems to be the outlet for a flock of repressed feelings and suppressed passions. That is why this duel is felt by many contemporary directors to demand

performance as a passionate collision of sweaty limbs, damp hair, and dribbling mouths, rather than the illusionary impact of fake swords and cardboard shields.

An actual chase after the hero's erotic object occurs in Act IV, when Coriolanus goes to Aufidius's house to put his military competence at the Volscians' service. The sexually homoerotic implication of Coriolanus's search for Aufidius comes to the fore in a cue by the hero, within the frame of a verbal skirmish with Aufidius's servants. Coriolanus, disguised as a beggar, is teased by a servant in these terms: "How, sir! Do you meddle with my master?" (IV, 5, 47); to which the hero replies with a linguistic pun that displaces the ordinary meaning of the verb "to meddle" as "to mix oneself up with someone" on to its obscene Elizabethan connotation, that meaning "to have sexual intercourse with someone", contextually expressing an implicit homosexual preference: "Ay, 'tis an honest service than to meddle with thy mistress" (IV, 5, 48). Aufidius also is erotically attracted by his enemy/friend. The effusive energy of his response to Coriolanus' visit expresses his joy in hyperbolic images and an obsessive repetition of Coriolanus' name:

O Martius, Martius!

Each word thou hast spoke hath weeded from my heart

A root of ancient envy. If Jupiter

Should from yond cloud speak divine things

And say 'Tis true', I'd not believe them more

Than thee, all-noble Martius. (IV, 5, 102-7)

What seems to me particularly relevant to my argument, is Aufidius' *theatrical/bodily* attitude. He gazes in exultation at Coriolanus' body, while he pronounces the famous – and erotically charged – cue "Let me twine/Mine arms about that body" (IV, 5, 107-8), allowing both the image to impress the audience, and the scene's dynamics to build up, before his advancing with open arms, fostering an actual embrace (110-11). In many contemporary productions, Aufidius delivers a large portion of his speech while still in Coriolanus' arms, "suited the action to the word" – as Hamlet would have it – as they now contend as hotly for love as ever they did in mutual hate. Aufidius steps back to gaze on Coriolanus' body once more in the cue "But that I see thee here" (116), expressing his happiness with monosyllabic emphasis, while Coriolanus' "You bless me, gods" (136) sounds like an enthusiastic "climax". At the end of the play, the erotic stance of the two generals' relationship is made explicit by Aufidius himself, when he recalls their encounter as the moment "when first I did *embrace* him" (IV, 7, 10), in all the secondary sexual meaning – also active in seventeenth-century English – of the verb "to embrace". After all, the homoerotic tonality of Aufidius's behaviour to Coriolanus is noted even by the common Volscians: "Our general

himself *makes a mistress of him*”, sanctifies himself with’s/hand, and turns up the white o’th’eye to his/discourse” (IV, 5, 199-202).

The completion of homoeroticism is actuated by Aufidius when he reports a dream he has frequently experienced, the dream of a physical and erotic *bodily fight* with Coriolanus:

I have nightly since
 Dreamt of encounters ‘twixt thyself and me-
 We have been down together in my sleep,
 Unbuckling helms, fisting each other throat-
 And wak’d half dead with nothing. (IV, 5, 123-7)

The motive of the erotic dream highlights the sexual component of the bodily fight, which is an emerging unconscious will for mutual corporeal possession. Unbuckling helms alludes to undressing, and undressing means delivering the bodies from any social or political constraints; fisting each other’s throats means neutralizing any interpersonal social and political distance; finally, awaking half dead entails the idea of homosexual orgasm, thanks to the linguistic pun, no less active in seventeenth-century England than nowadays, based on the recondite sense of *die* as *ejaculate*.

Both the peak and the *dénouement* of the personal tragedy of Coriolanus hinge around an energetic body language alimanted by strong passions. Soon after capitulating to Volumnia’s entreat, he moves upstage to physically position himself once more besides Aufidius, and obsessively repeats his name – exactly as Aufidius had done with his own before – in what sounds like a desperate cry of confirmation of love: “Now, good Aufidius,/Were you in my stead, would you heard/A mother less? Or granted less, Aufidius?” (V, 3, 191-3). He does not catch the ironic tone of the reply – “I was mov’d withal” (194) – but blindly seeks to summon up his shattered control with the self-deprecating humour of “And sir, it is no little thing to make/Mine eyes to sweat compassion” (195-6), followed by the resolute revelation of his political as well as sexual choice between family and partner: “For my part,/I’ll not to Rome, *I’ll be back with you*” (197-8). The fatal consummation of the tragedy resolves itself into discursive combat between the two agonists, both lacerated between love and hatred. It is Aufidius who starts it, unexpectedly insulting Coriolanus as “the traitor in the highest degree” (V, 6, 85). Unprepared for this attack from his partner, Coriolanus at first responds in a tone of bewildered incomprehension, which grows in intensity to an explosion of angry violence when he is addressed as “Martius”. This betrayal of his only remaining connection in the world proves too much for the hero’s physical and psychic strength. That is why Peter Hall wanted McKellen to accord the lines “Measureless liar, thou hast

made my heart/Too great for what contains it" (103-4) a literal interpretation, as he clutched his hand to his breast staggering on the stage: the violence of his grief and anger causes his heart literally to break. Thus the actor pronounced his last cues in extenuating speed, miming the physical symptoms of the heart attack which became the key image of the play's conclusion. Coriolanus fights back the pain and the emotion welling up inside him to bid the senate "thrust the lie unto him" (110), but Aufidius' brutal gibe "thou boy of tears" (100) is more than his feelings can bear. He is emotionally involved with the treaty of Rome and has, in fact, performed precisely what Aufidius accuses him of. He perfectly knows that his partner's taunt is a direct reference to the tears of compassion shed at his mother's supplication; it is thus the very truth of Aufidius' accusation that prompts Coriolanus to fall down in the enemy/friend's trap. He delivers a vigorous boast of his former invasion and conquest of the Volscian nation, once again insisting on the solitariness of his bodily action: "Boy! False hound!/If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there,/That like an eagle in a dove-cote, I/Flutter'd your Volscians in Corioles./*Alone I did it.* Boy!" (112-16). Sorrow and disillusion impede any possibility of rational defence. He picks up the last remains of his physical power to draw his sword and utter the final words which provoke Aufidius to give the signal for his assassination.

After Coriolanus' body falls to the ground, Aufidius rushes to stand in triumph upon the corpse, and tries to articulate his self-justification, while the whole stage is a bustle of chaotic movements on the part of lords, citizens, soldiers... The lords refuse to allow Aufidius the opportunity to acquit himself: first it is time to honour the dead, and the injunction "Bear from hence his body,/And mourn you for him" (141-42) is significantly addressed directly to Aufidius, rather than uttered as a command to the general multitude. At this point Aufidius loses control of his social mask, and his love is authentic. A profound sense of emptiness and desolation is conveyed by his admission: "I am struck with sorrow. Take him up" (147). The removal of Coriolanus' body means that the most important part of Aufidius' life is gone too: there will be no more fighting, no more chasing. As Aufidius and his officers ceremoniously lift the corpse and carry it in state, the tragic cycle of Coriolanus' body is completed.

